

## STUDENT'S CORNER

# ACCESSIBLE TOURISM – AN EXPRESSION OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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## ABSTRACT

*Accessible tourism involves the provision of customized tourist services for people requiring special conditions (disabled, seniors, and young children). Everyone has the right to travel, thus, by creating these conditions, both public administrations and private enterprises should express their Social Responsibility.*

*Due to the fact that in recent years accessibility has become a topic frequently debated at an international level, those involved in the Romanian tourism industry and political leaders have begun to show interest in supporting the development of a "tourism for all". In other words, a tourism where everyone can participate equally, regardless of the locomotor or sensory capacities.*

*The present study presents the results of an assessment of the development stage of accessible tourism in Romania. We have interviewed people who have a direct implication in this niche of Romanian tourism, namely a representative of the President Complex in Baile Felix (awarded by the European Commission for accessibility) and the representative of the Sano Touring Agency, the only Romanian member of the European Network for Accessible Tourism).*

*Success in this respect can come as a result of an appropriate professional approach to a number of factors that could lead to improved tourist offer with accessible services but also to encourage demand. In order to have a positive evolution, accessible tourism involves four steps: the awareness stage, the early stage, the development stage and the consolidation stage. In this paper we are going to analyse the stages that are currently taking place in Romania, namely: the awareness and the early stages.*

## Key words:

Accessible tourism, Social Responsibility, accessibility, tourism for all, ethical tourism

## JEL Classification:

L83, M14

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## INTRODUCTION

In the European Union, tourism represents the third major economic activity, being under constant development. It has a positive impact on economic growth but also on employment.

In recent years, sustainable tourism and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) have been promoted by both policymakers and clients. Some studies show that around 95% of tourism companies employ less than 10 people. Facilitating travel for people with disabilities is not just an imperative of human rights but also an extraordinary business opportunity. Therefore, in order to comply with market requirements, a change in mentality in the provision of services is required.

Accessibility has become a much debated topic at an international level. Accessible tourism is a form of tourism that involves the formation of collaborative processes between stakeholders that allow people with access needs (such as those related to mobility, sight, hearing, but also the cognitive ones) to travel independently, fairly and in dignity through products with universal design of services and environment.

The paper contains three components briefly presented. In the first part, called Ethics and Social Responsibility in Tourism, we will present principles of ethics and expressions of social responsibility in tourism as well as Tourism for all – an ethical tourism. In the next part of the paper, the defining elements of accessible tourism will be discussed. In this part, concepts such as accessible tourism, but also the economic and social role of this type of tourism as well as the needs of the elderly and the disabled during the development of tourist activities will be approached. This section will be ended by presenting the barriers encountered by the participants to accessible tourism.

Accessible tourism and its perspectives in Romania represent the subject of the last part of this paper. This section will discuss the general considerations on accessible tourism in Romania. The perspectives of this type of tourism in Romania are highlighted by a qualitative interview type research addressed to the manager of a Romanian hotel complex awarded by the European Commission for Accessibility Conditions and the representative of the only agency in Romania that is a member of ENAT (European Network for Accessible Tourism) and that welcomes disabled tourists. At the same time, there are presented some concrete measures for the development of accessible tourism in our country, through a plan that contains the evolution towards this type of tourism.

The purpose of this research is to find out the stage of accessible tourism in Romania and to provide the best options for the development of this type of tourism.

The objective of the paper is to highlight several steps that should be taken, both at microeconomic and macroeconomic level, to achieve success of accessible tourism in Romania.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Ethics and social responsibility in tourism**

Ethics is a conscious reflection, through norms or principles, of our moral beliefs and our own attitudes; this is a science (a branch of philosophy) that studies the practical and theoretical aspects of morality. It is also called "the science of good and evil", with theoretical and normative character, establishing a system of norms, values, moral categories (Țigu, 2003).

In the European Union, tourism is the third major economic activity, being under constant development. It has a positive impact on economic growth but also on employment. Tourism is an intensively resource consuming industry that influences the evolution of the environment and that could threaten cultural heritage (University of Surrey, 2012-2013).

The European Commission defines Corporate Social Responsibility as a responsibility of businesses with regard to the impact they have in society. According to this concept, companies should become socially responsible both by complying with the rules and by integrating social, environmental, ethical, consumer-related and human rights issues into business strategies and operations (Fair Tourism).

### **Tourism for all – an ethical tourism**

In recent years, people involved in the tourism industry as well as political leaders have begun to show a particular interest in supporting the development of "tourism for all". In other words, tourism in which everyone can participate equally, regardless of their locomotor or sensory capacities.

The Global Code of Ethics in Tourism is the reference document for the development of sustainable and responsible tourism. The WTO (World Tourism Organisation) commitments on accessibility are contained in Article 7 stating that "personal and direct access to the discovery and governance of the planet's resources is a right open equally to all the world's inhabitants; the increasing extensive participation in national and international tourism must be regarded as one of the best possible expressions of sustainable growth of leisure and should not be hampered (Tigu, 2003)."

The World Health Organization estimates that 15% of the world's population, about one billion people, has a form of disability. Also, if the aging population is also taken into account, the number of people experiencing difficulties on the road is growing. Most of us will develop certain forms of disability at a certain point, sooner or later, and we will need specific products, services and infrastructure (UNWTO, 2016).

The accessible tourism market presents an extraordinary opportunity for destinations that are ready to welcome tourists because they tend to travel during off-season, often accompanied or in groups, returning to the same places and in some parts of the world, spending holidays more than average.

Facilities and services customized for people with disabilities, seniors and parents with small children contribute to improving the quality of tourism products and increasing the attractiveness of tourist destinations.

### **Accessible tourism – a social responsibility**

Tourism is a stimulating factor for the global economic system due to the fact that its practice leads to consumption of related goods and services, and other sectors of the economy are also involved.

Along with the economic consequences, tourism has special socio-human significance. It shows considerable influence not only on the population in the visited areas, but also on tourists. In most cases, the effects of tourism are positive, but there are also less beneficial aspects.

Tourism encourages communication, enhancing ties between nations through people's travel to different countries across continents. It can also be an active learning point, raising the level of training, culture and civilization of people through contact with the reality of different nations.

Another important function of tourism is its comforting role. Therefore, it contributes both to the satisfaction of travellers' material needs and to the satisfaction of their spiritual needs.

In this context of socio-human significance that relates to human rights, there are good tourism practices in terms of accessible tourism. Each of us has the right to travel and to have access to the resources of the planet; therefore, by creating the conditions necessary for the development of accessible tourism, this goal is reached.

Accessible tourism is a form of tourism that involves the formation of collaborative processes between stakeholders that allow people with access needs (such as those related to mobility, sight, hearing, and cognitive issues) to travel independently, fairly and in dignity through products with universal design of services and environment (Darcy, 2010).

The term of accessible tourism appeared for the first time in 1989, during the International Year of People with Disabilities. In Europe, this concept has spread rapidly, followed by many changes in legislation, development priorities and perception of accessibility in the tourism sector. Viewed as a concept, accessible tourism is presented under several names such as: tourism for all, general tourism, universal tourism, barrier-free tourism (Bordeianu, 2015).

### **Barriers encountered in practicing accessible tourism**

People with disabilities, seniors and young children need conditions adapted to their needs in all the steps that need to be taken to make a trip.

In the pre-travel stage, i.e. the information stage, there are the most important barriers in terms of accessibility of the destinations for people with access difficulties (whether traveling alone or accompanied), hearing, seeing or even having behavioural problems. Although the accessibility information established by specialized organizations has been designed to overcome existing information barriers, it is worth pointing out that, for better visibility, information on the products accessibility should be incorporated into the main promotion channels in tourism (University of Surrey, 2012-2013).

Barriers encountered in the transit / transport phase are mostly referring to airlines that do not provide an environment accessible to their clients with such expectations. In addition, these barriers are more prevalent when using low-cost flights. Some barriers are impediments to physical access during departures and arrivals, while others, especially for people with sensory and behavioural deficiencies, are attitudinal (Portales, 2015).

Once they arrive at the destination, accessible tourism practitioners face another difficulty when it comes to access ways and accessible parking places (needed to travel around the destination), especially for people with limited mobility. There are also difficulties in the accommodation sector (physical access barriers are perceived as larger obstacles compared to attitudinal barriers) and leisure.

Inter-sectoral comparisons highlight the fact that attitudinal barriers are encountered more often than physical access barriers in all sectors by people with different types of access needs. Transport barriers (at destination) represent the most common problem for people with mobility, sensory and behavioural disabilities (University of Surrey, 2012-2013).

Among the distinguishing elements identified between destinations there is also the existence of sanitary groups adapted for disabled persons in all the tourism sectors mentioned above. Thus, all sectors need to step up their efforts to improve the availability of toilets as an indispensable element for people with access needs when they are on vacation (University of Surrey, 2012-2013).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **General considerations on accessible tourism in Romania**

Three members from Romania, namely: the Motivation Romania Foundation, ADR - Agency for Regional Development (represented by Gabriela Macoveiu) and Sano Touring (travel agency, represented by Irina Gorganeanu) are in the records of ENAT (European Network for Accessible Tourism).

In recent years, in the world, has emerged the trend to adapt the service offer to all categories of tourists, including those with special mobility and accessibility needs.

Also according to ENAT - European Network for Accessible Tourism, correlated with the decrease in mobility, there is the aging phenomenon of the population. According to statistical data, 25% of Europe's population will be represented by older people, who have the opportunity and want to travel. This percentage is further added to 80 million people in Europe who have disabilities and require customized tourism services. Approximately 10-11% (increasing percentage) of Europe's population should benefit from customized tourism offers and ease of access.

Therefore, accessible tourism is to become a global priority, not only in the Romanian tourism market, being in a simultaneous growth with the demographic explosion (Motivation Romania Foundation, 2017).

As far as the accessible tourism in Romania is concerned, we should note the participation, in 2013, at the project *European Excellence Awards for Accessible Tourism*, where the following locations received prizes: for the 1<sup>st</sup> category, accommodation and food, the 1<sup>st</sup> place was awarded to the President Complex Băile Felix - SC Pod Serv Com SRL and SC Aqua President SRL, the 2<sup>nd</sup> place was awarded to Palace Hotel - SC Băile Govora SA and the 3<sup>rd</sup> place was awarded to Cozia Hotel Complex - SC Călimănești Căciulata SA. For the 2<sup>nd</sup> category, national heritage, culture, entertainment, recreation, the 1<sup>st</sup> place was awarded to Piatra Neamt City Hall Jurilovca locality, as well as other tourist localities in Europe (Tourism Ministry, 2013) were also awarded.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Data analysis and research results**

In order to assess the current state of accessible tourism in Romania, we have decided to conduct a qualitative research based on interviews. Thus, we have interviewed two people who, through the affairs they deal with, have direct contact with this niche of clients.

For the study of travel agencies that practice accessible tourism in Romania, we have chosen to contact Mrs. Irina Gorganeanu, representative of the only tour operator registered at ENAT (European Network for Accessible Tourism), Sano Touring.

Sano Touring is the only Romanian travel agency specializing in accessible tourism. It has been operating since 2015 and aims to attract to our country foreign tourists with special needs in all categories - physical, mental disabilities, families with children, seniors. The main motivation to focus on this customer segment was encouraged by the fact that there is a person with special needs in their team, this leading them to realize that they have to do something for this category.

The distinction compared to other agencies is represented by the niche on which it operates, namely tourism for people with special needs - visually, hearing impaired, wheelchair users, people with disabilities, families with children, seniors. The agency services include carefully selected and tested tourist programs, tours, treatment and relaxation programs, all in Romania. The agency's activity is mainly of incoming, but there have also been requests from people with special needs to destinations outside Romania - Italy and Spain.

ENAT recognition is basically the recognition of the quality of services provided in accessible tourism. Affiliation to such a network (ENAT) has helped Sano Touring to become known and to develop partnerships in several countries. Pantou is an accessible travel portal where you can post your business and you can access a network of partners (registration is free of charge).

The agency's staff is represented by two travel agents and two guides (one of them with a physical disability). Staff is prepared to avoid delicate situations. Their training was carried out through ENAT courses and a MOOC module organized by an Italian company specialized in trainings for accessible tourism.

Sano Touring's target market is represented by the European markets - Germany, Britain, France, Scandinavian countries, but expansion to the US and Canada is also under consideration. Clients come from partnerships with agencies, after many searches and participations in various events (travel fairs), from online promotion on all channels and from posting tours to various aggregators.

Mainly, the tourists that Sano Touring serves are those with locomotor disabilities, wheelchair users (hence the main requests), but the above-mentioned categories (visually, hearing impaired, mentally disabled persons, families with children, seniors) can also be managed. In terms of needs, they provide adapted transport (there are specially equipped cars / minibuses with access ramps, special harness and safety belts), welcoming hotels (equipped with entrance ramps, restaurant, lobby accessible toilets, rooms without thresholds, with wide doors to accommodate a wheelchair, special toilets without a bathtub or shower cabin with thresholds, support bars, shower stools, level switches and more), toilets facilities, ramps, guides, public transport facilities, restaurants equipped with such equipment, qualified staff who understands their needs.

For practicing accessible tourism in our country, Sano Touring recommends, first of all, spa resorts that have shown to have understood how important it is to practice tourism for all and how useful are the cure factors in Romania - Baile Felix, Covasna, Eforie Nord, Sovata, but also the dedicated destinations in Transylvania - Brasov, Sibiu, Cluj Napoca, Târgu Mureş, Moldova - tour of the monasteries belonging to UNESCO heritage, Maramureş - for traditions and last but not least the Danube Delta for its uniqueness.

A second interview was addressed to Mr. Adrian Martin, representative of President Complex in Băile Felix, which is among the sites awarded in 2013 by the European Commission for Accessibility.

To the question "How did you think about providing services for people with disabilities, seniors and young children?", the representative of President Complex answered: "By definition, Baile Felix is a resort addressing those with health problems, especially rheumatic, water in Felix being the most suitable for treating spinal cord diseases in the country. By increasing our activity on the basis of treatment, we have decided to diversify (Martin, 2017)."

President Complex in Baile Felix is important for the accessible tourism practitioners by providing: special rooms, facilities for access in wheelchairs, existence of elevators, ramps, etc.

President Complex's staff has the necessary knowledge, including specialist training, to safely take care of clients.

With regard to the facilities of the complex, there are rooms especially equipped for people with disabilities, where they have the facilities necessary to be as comfortable as possible. Access to and through the hotel is easy, with well-sized ramps and elevators. One advantage of the complex is that, in terms of accommodation, the price of the rooms with the facilities for the needs of the disabled persons is no different from that of the ordinary rooms.

Asked about the state of collaboration with existing organizations at European level that have accessible tourism as an activity segment, the representative of the President Complex said: "Through the prize we have received, they have included us on their database. We are more leisure than strict treatment location, those who come to us choose to "fix" their health while having fun / relaxing, we are not like a hospital. That's why we did not insist very much on this segment of clients, at a large number at the same time the allocated resources having to be changed. But we have everything we need to provide services for a small number of tourists (Martin, 2017)."

### **Concrete measures for the development of accessible tourism in Romania**

According to a European Commission report on the economic impact and patterns in the development of accessible tourism in Europe (2012-2013), travellers with special needs in terms of access are often confronted with problems while preparing a holiday. This is generally due to the fact that those responsible for destinations, as well as tourism service providers, are not sufficiently aware of the importance of accessible tourism. Many of them are not ready yet to properly respond (both in terms of infrastructure, services and attitudes) to the requests of clients with access needs.

Also, the results of the same study show that most tourists with particular access needs have been able to find destinations that were satisfactory to them. This highlights two important aspects: firstly, although they are facing difficulties in finding information, tourists with special needs in terms of access are often able to find destinations

customised to their needs, and secondly, the number of destinations already benefiting of accessibility see it as a competitive advantage and coordinate activities according to well-defined strategies.

Success can come as a result of an appropriate professional approach to a number of factors that could lead to improved tourist offer with accessible services but also to encourage demand. According to a report made by the University of Surrey, the path to success in accessible tourism involves taking four steps: the awareness stage, the early phase, the development phase and the consolidation phase. The table below outlines some ideas that could be followed, depending on the factors of influence and the related stage (University of Surrey, 2012-2013). (Table 1)

**Table 1. The way to success**

	Awareness stage	Early stage	Development stage	Consolidation stage
<b>1. Commitments of the decision-makers</b>	Service providers are encouraged to take interest in accessible tourism and to become aware of its economic and social benefits	Provision of support from politicians, local governments and other decision-makers, in terms of education, training, but also financial support	Harmonization of standards and legislation to provide better guidance to suppliers and clearer information for users Integration into mass offers	
<b>2. Coordination and continuity</b>		Dedication of work or its coordination within a structure for the management of tourism organizations with adequate resources		
<b>3. Networking and participation</b>		Encouragement of the transfer of knowledge, particularly through professional networks	Improvement of the coordination efforts by establishing public-private partnerships at local and regional level	Provisions of accessibility to all services and price categories offered on the market
<b>4. Strategic planning</b>	Raising awareness on the diversity of access needs and behavioural patterns, depending on tourists (individuals, groups, countries of origin)	Inventory of current offer, referring to infrastructure, services, but also possibilities to improve them	Improvement of the offer gradually, including accessibility in long-term planning, for investment Development of feedback tools for clients to set accessibility priorities	Improvement of marketing and advertising strategies by considering accessibility features
<b>5. Managerial knowledge and qualifications</b>		Along with management knowledge, staff needs to have basic knowledge about accessibility	Regular training for staff and managers	
<b>6. Optimization of resources</b>		Use of as many resources as possible for the strategic development of accessible tourism and prioritizing tasks in the service chain		
<b>7. Communication and marketing</b>			Inclusion of information about accessibility in the mass tourism information Assumption of personal information into an account (e.g., social media)	

*Source: University of Surrey (2012-2013)*

Travelers with access difficulties face obstacles starting from holiday planning, and generally they claim that much of the responsibility lies with local authorities, saying they do not put enough importance to accessible tourism (European Network for Accessible Tourism, 2007).

In many countries, tourism depends on public finances. Thus, priorities must be restored when the money is distributed.

At present, awareness and early stages are taking place in Romania. There is essential for the awareness stage that Romanian entrepreneurs and public administrations understand the importance of accessible tourism. It should be seen both as a social responsibility, but also as a financial benefit. Also from the point of view of strategic planning, it is essential to increase awareness on the diversity of needs for people with access needs and their behavioural patterns.

In Romania, the principles set out above must be consolidated at the early stage, but some new ones should be developed. An extraordinary investment is to provide local government and private enterprise support to train and educate staff to better relate to people with disabilities, children and seniors (acquiring basic knowledge of accessibility). Another good starting point is the increase of the interest of some organizations working in Romanian tourism for the development of accessible tourism.

Also, Romanian tourism workers should be given the opportunity to relate and learn from the foreign professionals in this tourism niche.

The inclusion in the advertisements, brochures of accessible travel packages alongside the classic packages of travel agencies is a good way to increase the credibility of people with access needs in terms of quality of service.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper is intended to be a plea for change, for giving up certain prejudices, for humanizing attitudes towards our fellows.

All of these trigger the struggle for moral values: good, truth, beauty, responsibility, dignity, tolerance, and are part of the recommendations of global organizations, recommendations that encourage tolerance, solidarity and friendship among people.

Through this research, we have tried to offer a modest support in solving a topical issue concerning the tourism activity in Romania, analysing briefly the state of accessible tourism in our country.

Accessible tourism / tourism for all is a relatively new concept in literature and is a challenge for all tourists. The tourism market for all is estimated at almost 27% of the total population and 12% of the world tourist market, including seniors, disabled people and families with small children.

If at a first glance this category of tourists could be ignored, considering that their number is small compared to the total number of tourists, we certainly cannot ignore a reality generated by the passage of time, namely that, in the near future or farther away, that is to say, at an unknown moment, any person could develop certain forms of sensory or motor disability.

Thus, the accessible tourism market should facilitate travel for all categories of people mentioned above, being both a way of respecting human rights and a tourism business opportunity. Everyone must be able to enjoy trips, seen as a way of knowing, recreating and recovery. In order to achieve this goal, that is to say that every visitor should feel at home or even better than at home, it is absolutely necessary to make the whole tourism sector responsible and unconditionally involved in tourism at all levels.

Regarding the accessible tourism in Romania, following the analysis we have made, we have concluded that this niche is becoming more and more important. It is worth noting that in 2013 the accessibility contest organized by the National Authority for Tourism (ANT) in Romania was interesting, the following destinations being prized: President Complex in Baile Felix, Palace Hotel in Băile Govora, Cozia Hotel Complex, but also the Municipality of Piatra Neamt.

At present, there are associations, accommodation units, public administrations and travel agencies in Romania that want to make tourism more accessible. They have understood the importance of this niche of tourism and regard it both as a social responsibility and as a financial benefit.

*Note: This article was presented on April 2017 at Business and Tourism Faculty Students' Scientific Session and won the first prize at Tourism Section.*

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